A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

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The invitation to participate in this issue of LDQ asked me to review my earlier contributions to learning disabilities research, reflect on trends since then, and offer suggestions or predictions for the future of the field. I begin by reviewing my work on the social construction and representation of school failure as student disability and on the reconstruction of special education and public education to avoid the need for such representations. In the remaining sections, I identify several trends in education and society and, by linking them, recommend that the field of learning disabilities join the struggle to create a strong democratic future for students and communities, a project that involves transforming education and American democracy itself, and begins with a transformation of professionalism in education and special education.

Representation and Reconstruction

Sternberg and Spear-Swerling (1999) place my research within what they call the "contextual" perspective on learning disabilities, as opposed to the dominant "biological" and "cognitive" perspectives that view learning disabilities as an intrinsic neuropathology. Although I recognize this and other types of learning-relevant student variability, my work is concerned with external processes by which such variability is socially constructed and represented as "learning disabilities;" that is, as a social category like those of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and disability itself. Moreover, because social categories are not represented equally, I am concerned, ultimately, with unequal power relations in society, relations that determine who gets represented, how and by whom, and with what social consequences.[1] In this regard, my work focuses on the "disciplinary power" of special education which, operating under the taken-for-granted conventions of its knowledge tradition, has the effect of constituting students as subjects for investigation, surveillance and treatment, a representation that has negative moral and political consequences because it involves various forms of medicalization, objectification, confinement, and exclusion.[2]

My goal is to disrupt this power relation, to deconstruct it and the social categories it creates by exposing inconsistencies, contradictions, and silences in special education's functionalist knowledge tradition, and by disseminating alternative interpretations of special education and student disability. Moreover, as a critical theorist grounded in the democratic humanist tradition of John Dewey and American pragmatism, my aim is to encourage special educators to reconstruct their practices and discourses using interpretations that promote the values of democracy, community, participation, and inclusion (see Skrtic, 1986, 1988a, 1990a, 1991a, 1995a, 1995c, 1995e, 1995g, 1995h).[3]

Because social institutions are instrumental in constituting humans as subjects, my research is concerned more broadly with public education's role in constructing student disability, which I address through detailed organizational analyses of the structure and culture of schools. In this work I argue that student disability and special education are institutional categories created by a perfect storm in the historical development of public education – the fateful convergence of a dramatic increase in student diversity and the extensive bureaucratization of schools in the first half of the 20th century. As bureaucracies, schools are performance organizations, standardized, non-adaptable structures that must screen out diversity by forcing students with unconventional needs out of the system. And because they are public bureaucracies charged with serving all students, special education emerges as a legitimating device, an institutional practice that, in effect, shifts the blame for school failure to students through medicalizing and objectifying discourses, while reducing the uncertainty of student

diversity by containing it through exclusionary practices. Moreover, as institutionalized bureaucracies, schools do not change on demand; they respond to mandates like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by signaling compliance with the letter of the law through symbols and ceremonies of change that are largely decoupled from meaningful practice (think of IEPs, IEP staffings, and what passes as inclusive education or "access to the general curriculum"). Avoiding the social construction of student disability and achieving the spirit of the IDEA both require a fundamentally different kind of organization, that is, a non-bureaucratic problem-solving organization known historically as "adhocracy" (Bennis & Slater, 1964) and today as the "learning organization" (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996). Adhocracies are premised on innovation rather than standardization, on the invention of personalized practices through organizational learning grounded in collaboration, mutual adaptation, and reflexive discourse among the organization's members and the people it serves (see Skrtic, 1988b, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b, 1995b, 1995d, 1995f, 1999, 2003).

The goal of this line of research is to deconstruct and reconstruct public education and special education – or in pragmatist terms, to redefine the context of a social problem until it disappears (Blanko, 1994) – by showing that, regardless of its causes or extent, student diversity is not only not a problem in a learning organization, it is an asset, an enduring source of uncertainty, and thus the driving force behind innovation, growth of knowledge, and progress, which in organizational terms makes educational equity a precondition for educational excellence. While not denying that pathology-based moral arguments for educational equity were instrumental in securing the important rights of the IDEA, this approach has limits as a guide to policy and advocacy, especially since in practice these rights are more symbolic than real in bureaucratic schools.

In terms of reform policy, then, I urged the field to align itself with the school restructuring movement (e.g., McNeil, 1986; Oakes, 1985), which in the late 1980s and early 1990s sought to achieve excellence and equity simultaneously through adhocracy-like structural reforms. In terms of advocacy, I suggested that we were in a position to move beyond interest group politics by arguing that restructuring schools as learning organizations serves the best political and economic interests of all students and of society, particularly under the historical contingencies of an emerging postindustrial era (see Skrtic, 1988b, 1991a, 1991b, 1995b, 1995d, 1995f, 1999, 2003; Skrtic & Sailor, 1996; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996).

Transformational Reform

The first trend of note since my earlier work is the rise of the standards-based reform movement (SBR), which, after overtaking the school restructuring movement in the mid 1990s, was codified in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) after having been incorporated into the IDEA in its 1997 reauthorization. On the bright side, the SBR framework of NCLB/IDEA seeks to improve the learning of all students by improving the functioning of school organizations. On the dark side, it is an extreme form of bureaucratic outcomes-based accountability (O'Day, 2002), the very approach that William Spady, architect of outcomes-based education, cautioned against at the start of the SBR movement. Spady called this approach the "traditional" model of SBR, which he rejected because its primary reform strategy, curriculum alignment, retains and extends the existing bureaucratic structure of schools (Champlin, 1991; Spady & Marshall, 1991). The negative effects of this model are apparent in another discouraging trend, the deteriorating conditions of special education practice since 1997. As with the IDEA, realizing the policy advantages of SBR for students with unconventional needs requires collective problem solving, and thus a supportive and collegial learning community premised on reflexive, mutually adaptive and collaborative practice, adhocratic conditions that do not exist in schools under the traditional SBR model (Skrtic, Harris, & Shriner, 2005). Special educators are neither engaged in meaningful collaboration with general educators nor adequately supported by administrators, in general, or with regard to implementing research-based instructional practices (Kozleski, Mainzer, Deshler, Coleman, & Rodriquez-Walling, 2000; Schumaker et al., 2002).[4] Moreover, they are frustrated by ambiguous and competing responsibilities and contradictory expectations, an indication of the increased technical demands and political complexities of their work, demands and complexities for which experienced and especially novice special educators are not prepared (Brownell & Skrtic, 2002; Mainzer, Deshler, Coleman, Kozleski, & Rodriguez-Walling, 2003; McIntyre, 2000). Finally, these unacceptable conditions are reciprocally linked to another trend – the critical shortage of qualified special educators (Kozleski et al., 2000; Mainzer et al., 2003; Mastropieri, 2001; McIntire, 2000).

My recommendation with regard to these SBR-related problems is for the fields of special education and learning disabilities to take a "third-way" policy position between those of NCLB advocates and detractors, one that retains the outcomes focus and rights of NCLB/IDEA, but replaces the traditional model of SBR with what Spady calls the "transformational" model, which for him is "the highest evolution of the out-

comes-based concept" (Spady & Marshall, 1991, p. 70). Premised on the belief that the purpose of education is to prepare students for successful community life, this model engages local educators and community stakeholders in a discourse to determine broad school outcomes leading to desirable conditions of life for students as future citizens. At this point, "districts set their existing curriculum frameworks aside" (Spady & Marshall, 1991, p. 70), allowing their curriculum, instructional practices, and organizational structure to evolve in support of the desirable future for students and communities.

In terms of instructional practices, the third-way position should use the idea of universal design to argue for personalizing instruction for all students and, by extension, for restructuring schools as adhocracies to make the necessary organizational learning through collaboration, mutual adaptation and reflexive discourse possible.[5] Most important, in these transformational discourses, both locally and nationally, we should argue for a social, deliberative, or democratic curriculum, one that teaches civic and academic content by engaging students and teachers in social problem solving.[6] Ultimately, then, I am recommending that we argue for a curriculum, pedagogy, and structure for schooling that develops the intellectual capacities and cultural sensibility necessary for a strong democratic future for students and communities.

Strong Democracy

Organizations are notorious for distorting the social goals that society creates them to achieve (Scott, 1981), a process that in the 20th century turned the goal of education into a type of schooling shaped by the medium of a bureaucratic organization. Type of schooling is an important moral and political question because, beyond the problems noted above, the purposes we ascribe to education reflect our values about the kind of society we aspire to be, our "preferred future expressed as a particular kind of training for the young" (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 261).

Historically, we have ascribed three purposes to education – democratic equality, social mobility, and social efficiency (Labaree, 1997). Democratic equality is concerned with preparing all of our young "with equal care" (p. 17) for effective citizenship, as well as with minimizing social inequality to permit equal participation in the political process. However, the other two purposes are incompatible with democratic equality – social mobility because its concern for giving individual students an advantage in competing for social positions turns education into a commodity, which makes schooling increasingly stratified and unequal; and social efficiency because its concern for allocating students to social positions requires that schooling mirror the stratified and unequal structure of the market economy. This incompatibility among educational purposes reflects the basic tension at the core of all liberal democracies – the tension between democracy and capitalism, between political equality and social inequality – that must be balanced in social institutions like education that serve both masters (Labaree, 1997). Moreover, when imbalances occur, they can be traced to which of two competing political philosophies is dominant in society, market liberalism or developmental liberalism, which are fundamentally different approaches to balancing the tension between democracy and capitalism (Macpherson, 1977; Ryan, 1972).[7]

In this regard, the most important political trend over the past two decades has been the growing dominance of market liberalism in American political culture, which from *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) through NCLB has inordinately influenced the way we think and talk about public education, justify its existence (or elimination), and attempt to reform it (Apple, 2001, 2004; Engel, 2000; Henig, 1994; Loxley & Thomas, 2001).

Market liberalism emphasizes social mobility and social efficiency to the virtual exclusion of democratic equality because it views politics as an extension of market activity, a view in which individuals are mere competitors in the consumption of political goods, and government is simply a protector of economic markets and private rights. Democracy in this view is thin or weak, for the most part amounting to little more than occasional voting for self-selected political elites. Conversely, developmental liberalism emphasizes democratic equality because it views democratic politics itself as a public good, as a source of reciprocal self-development and social improvement in which citizens develop and exert their capacities for collective problem solving through reflexive discourse (Held, 1996; Ryan, 1972). Early-20th century developmental liberals like John Dewey shared a commitment to a strong, participatory form of democracy, one that extends beyond government to all social institutions, including family, church, business, and education (Barber, 1984). As a democratic humanist, Dewey saw all social institutions as sites of political education through participatory politics, and in this sense he saw schools as doubly educational, as both a form of democratic training for the young and a site of political education for professionals and citizens (Dewey, 1976, 1980, 1988a, 1991).

Because strong, participatory democracy is the best defense against all forms of injustice and discrimination, I recommend that, in both local and national transformational discourses, we argue for just such a

democratic future for students, communities and professionals. Beyond breaking market liberalism's strangle hold on education and public policy generally, such an achievement will require transforming the professional culture of education.

Civic Professionalism

The political education of strong democrats will take more than an adhocratic or democratic structure for schools. It also requires transforming education's current technocratic form of professionalism into the model of civic professionalism advanced by Dewey and other early-20th century pragmatists and civic progressives (Dewey, 1988b). Premised on the intellectual capacities and cultural sensibility of the strong democrat, the practical rationality of pragmatism (see Note 4), and the traditional idea of a profession as a calling, civic professionalism restores a sense of collective social purpose in the professions. It recognizes the professions' responsibility to the community – especially to those most negatively affected by social problems, including the malformation of social institutions like public education – and ultimately, that the point and value of professional service is its contribution to the good society and the good life for all (Sullivan, 1995).

An important trend in this regard is that civic professionalism is receiving renewed attention today as the mode of inquiry in learning organizations (Argyris & Schön, 1996), as a response to the increased interdependencies and social inequalities of globalization (Kent, 2000; Sullivan, 1995), and as an ethic of civically engaged practice for the professions of education and special education (Skrtic, 2000; Sullivan, 2005).

Because there is little hope of transforming schooling or professionalism without a political re-education of educators and teacher educators as strong democrats, I recommend that the fields of special education and learning disabilities become the vanguard for this type of political re-education in schools and schools of education, and thereby a voice for re-engaging the university in the political life of the community.

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ENDNOTES

[1.] For similarly oriented contextual analyses, see, for example, Carrier (1983), Christensen (1999), and Dudley-Marling (2004). Although the environmental focus of the "response-to-instruction" identification model (e.g., Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003) has implications for such analyses, space limitations preclude addressing it here.

[2.] This admittedly harsh postmodern interpretation will be galling to the career special educator, but this is intentional because I am using it as part of an immanent critique, a form of modern emancipatory social analysis based on the affinity of humans to reconcile their claims about themselves (ideals) with their actual social conditions (reality) (Benhabib, 1986; Kiel, 1995; Note 3). Immanent critiques expose the contradictions between humans' claims and conditions, between their values and practices, with the aim of freeing them from their present conditions, of transforming the real into the ideal. In this regard, my work describes what fields like special education and learning disabilities hold themselves to be, and then confronts them with what they in effect have become. With regard to disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980), by saying that special education "has the effect of" constituting students as subjects, I am referring to Foucault's point that it subjugates professionals as well as their clients (see Skrtic, 1995e).

[3.] I am being explicit in locating my research in the (modern) humanist paradigm because it has been characterized as postmodernist (e.g., Kauffman, 1999; Sasso, 2001). This is understandable perhaps because I use postmodern theories in my analyses, but true only in an important limited sense. Humanists are paradigm pluralists, historically drawing substantive and methodological insights from the other modern paradigms and, more recently, from postmodernism. Democratic humanists, then, select from among such insights those that permit them to reconstruct social problems in ways that advance democratic values, institutions, and practices (Kiel, 1995). Moreover, like other critical theorists, I recognize that certain forms of postmodernism – what others call "strong postmodernism" (Benhabib, 1992) or "antimodernism" (Burbules & Rice, 1991), and what, following Antonio (1989), I call "radical" or "Continental" postmodernism – undercut the very liberationist politics of critical theory. This is why, though I draw upon strong postmodernists such as Foucault (1980) and Derrida (1982), I use their work merely as analytic devices within a broader immanent critique, a modern form of critical social analysis grounded in the humanist paradigm (see Note 2). To the extent that my work can be considered postmodern, it is a form of "weak postmodernism" (Benhabib, 1992), or what, again following Antonio, I call "progressive liberal postmodernism," which is a reappropriation of the modern democratic humanist epistemology, ethical ideals and political commitments of American pragmatism (see Antonio, 1989; Skrtic, 1991a, 1995e, 2004).

[4.] In this latter regard, I can note briefly that NCLB's "scientifically based research" requirement suffers from at least four problems. First, given its inherent logic of fidelity, it amounts to an effort to standardize teaching, which, as we know from the "effective schools" reform movement, intensifies the problem of poor academic performance for vulnerable students (Cuban, 1989; Stedman, 1987; Wise, 1988), including those labeled disabled (Skrtic, 1988b, 1991a, 1991b). Second, as institutionalized bureaucracies, schools are extremely poor contexts for adoption of standardized practices with fidelity, as recent research on implementing research-based practices in schools shows (Klingner, Ahwee, Pilnieta, & Menendez, 2003; Schumaker et

al., 2002). Third, an emerging body of research indicates that a balanced, integrated approach is more effective for all students than fidelity to a particular instructional method, a finding that applies both to comparisons of explicit and constructivist methods (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003; Jones & Southern, 2003; Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolezal, 2002) and of the explicit methods of direct instruction and strategic instruction, the most widely recognized research-based methods in the field of learning disabilities (Swanson, 2001). Finally, the "scientifically based research" requirement is premised on the instrumental or technical rationality of positivism, which is most suited to narrowly defined problems that focus on one thing at a time defined by one criterion. As such, on its own, positivism is ineffective in institutional contexts like schools where multiple goals and activities must be integrated and general purposes must be translated into specific judgments. In these settings decisions cannot be effectively divided into separate, single-aim issues. Therefore, before technical rationality can work, ambiguous situations must be transformed into solvable problems by balancing goals, activities, and competing values, and this requires practical rationality, the kind of reasoning upon which the democratic humanist tradition of pragmatism is premised. Although positivism has ignored and denigrated it, practical rationality is a precondition of technical rationality and, as such, is indispensable for both science and the development and improvement of professional practice (see Anderson, 1993; Sullivan, 1995).

5. I owe the idea of using universal design to argue for the adhocratic structure to Tom Hehir (personal communication, December, 2004). Also see Hehir (2002).

6. On the need for, and examples of, such a deliberative curriculum, see Parker (2003).

7. A third "managerial" type of liberalism is critically important too, but is beyond the scope of the current discussion. Briefly, managerial liberals are also weak democrats and thus, like market liberals, favor a market model of politics and democracy over more substantive political participation. The difference is that, whereas market liberals view economic markets as the ideal coordinating mechanism of a liberal society, managerial liberals give this distinction to bureaucracy (Hayek, 1967). The archetype bureaucratic organization for early-20th century managerial liberals, including the first generation of university-trained urban superintendents (Tyack & Hanson, 1982), was the capitalist firm, which they adopted as a model for government along with corporate management as a template for public administration. Both market and managerial liberals want limited democracy, the former to protect the market from government interference, the latter to protect public bureaucracies and their administrators and professionals from lay citizen interference. On the negative effects of managerial liberalism for public administration, see Denhardt and Denhardt (2003); for public education and educational reform, see Skrtic and Kent (2004). On the significance of educational administration's adoption of corporate organization and management in the creation of special education, see Skrtic (1988b, 1991a, 1991b, 1995b, 1995d, 1995f).